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Colby's Intelligence Gap

By John Lofton
Managing Editor, Washington Weekly

WASHINGTON—Now retired from federal service and an attorney here in the Nation's capital, former CIA Director William Colby is one of the Carter Administration's SALT-sellers, a group of government and non-government officials who are criss-crossing the country propagandizing for a second strategic arms limitation agreement between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. But, Mr. Colby has a problem, ironically an intelligence problem: he doesn't really know what he's talking about. Or, put another way, he lacks the relevant data to reach the conclusion to which he has jumped.

On March 22, in Birmingham, Alabama, at a State Department-sponsored SALT-selling conference, Mr. Colby was a substitute speaker for Gen. George Seignious, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. At this forum, he characterized the U.S. intelligence gathering operation as "fantastic," declaring:

"I, for one, believe, on the basis of what I know to date, that we have the machinery, the capability to adequately verify the SALT II agreement."

In an article in the April 1979 issue of Worldview magazine, subsequently excerpted and published in the Washington Star, Mr. Colby once again expressed his belief that the U.S. could detect any significant cheating by the Soviets on the SALT II pact. He wrote that "our intelligence capabilities offer a new dimension for confidence" and "intelligence can indeed assist 'adequately' to verify our security under a SALT agreement."

In a letter to me on April 24, however, Mr. Colby says that his magazine article was indeed written before the loss of the important U.S. intelligence monitoring stations in Iran, a loss which he calls a "sad event." Nonetheless, he says that through "other means" the SALT II agreement, "as it has been discussed in the press," seems to him to be "adequately verifiable to protect us, if not to win legal points in a non-existent court of law."

On the same day his letter to me was dated, Mr. Colby shows up as a SALT-seller on the nationally-televised public television news show "The MacNeil-Lehrer Report." When pressed by interviewer Jim Lehrer as to whether the U.S. could or could not verify the throw-weight of Soviet missiles

considering the loss of U.S. intelligence posts in Iran, Mr. Colby makes an astonishing admission. He says:

"I gather we cannot get it. I am not privy to secret information these days, I have not been for several years. And so, consequently, I don't know what they have today and don't have today. The Senator (Jake Garn, R-Utah, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, who is also a guest on the program) knows better than I do about that. But I would assume none today, on this particular subject of throw-weight. But that doesn't mean we don't have information about the missiles generally."

Now, William Colby's lack of access to classified information for "several years" is a significant blind-spot, according to SALT-sellers and SALT critics within the government who know something about the way intelligence is gathered. A White House SALT expert, who is privy to up-to-the-minute classified information and who has worked on SALT for years, tells me:

"If someone was out of this business at the start of the Carter Administration then there are several limitations on this person's knowledge about SALT. There are several key problems now with SALT that did not exist years ago, things having to do with warheads, new types of missiles and cruise missiles. The problem of how to verify qualitative limitations on missiles is a problem now and wasn't so much years ago."

Major Mike Burch, a public affairs officer in the Operations Branch of the Defense Department, says that yes, it is "pretty important" to be privy to current classified data in order to have a "working knowledge" of the SALT verification subject.

Tom Halstead, head of public affairs at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, tells me:

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